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Fashion system Shanghai: The advent of a new gatekeeper

Tim Lindgren

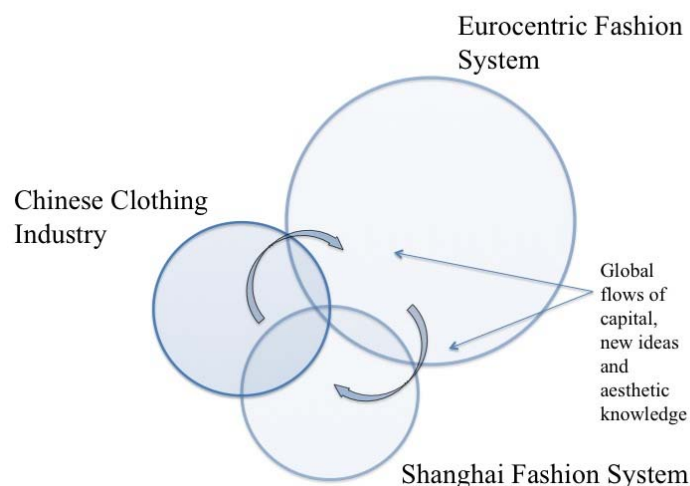
Abstract

The term fashion system describes inter-relationships between production and consumption illustrating how the production of fashion is a collective activity. For instance, Yuniya Kawamuraⁱ notes systems for the production of fashion differ around the globe and are subject to constant change, and Jennifer Craikⁱⁱ draws attention to an ‘array of competing and intermeshing systems cutting across western and non-western cultures. In China, Shanghai’s nascent fashion system seeks to emulate the Eurocentric system of Fashion Weeks and industry support groups. It promises emergent designers a platform for global competition, yet there are tensions from within. Interaction with a fashion system inevitably means becoming validated or legitimised. Legitimation in turn depends upon gatekeepers who make aesthetic judgments about the status, quality and cultural value of a designers workⁱⁱⁱ.

Notwithstanding the proliferation of fashion media, in Shanghai a new gatekeeper has arrived, seeking to filter authenticity from artifice, offering truth in a fashion market saturated with fakery and the hollowness of foreign consumptive practice, and providing a place of sanctuary for Chinese fashion design. Thus this paper discusses how new agencies are allowing designers in Shanghai greater control over their brand image while creating novel opportunities for promotion and sales. It explores why designers choose this new model and provides new knowledge of the curation of fashion by these gatekeepers.

Keywords: Fashion system, legitimacy, gatekeeper, agency, China, Shanghai

In 1978, When China opened for trade with the West, after then-president Deng Xiaoping granted Chinese entrepreneurs new permissions, foreign fashion companies were attracted to valuable economies of scale and competitive costs of garment production, resulting in China becoming the garment manufacturer to the world.^{iv} Since then, the Chinese government has become increasingly aware of the importance of moving beyond this role, particularly as it has re-focussed on its domestic economy. In this context, my paper focuses upon how Shanghai's nascent fashion system might be contextualised in a simple model that separates the clothing industry, Shanghai's fashion system and the hegemonic Eurocentric fashion system in order to understand better the activities of fashion designers, and the gatekeepers of its system. In particular, this paper discusses how new commercial agencies, operating as gatekeepers, have appeared to fill a gap in the volatile but vibrant marketplace.



As Michael Keane^v explains, 'Made in China' is to be supplemented with 'Created in China', yet it is the manner in which this is occurring that is important. Typically this process has been constrained by two key forces that have shaped the perception of Chinese development. Chinese culture, and Chinese politics have long held an almost unsurmountable presence over many aspects of daily life, including cultural expression, however this is changing, in part because of exchanges of aesthetic information due to globalisation, but also because of China's global ascendancy as an economically powerful nation. Chinese fashion designers are increasingly capable, confident of their skills, and comfortable with their nationality.

Moreover, their global forays and their domestic successes, while relatively unappreciated by a global fashion culture concerned with the consumption of Western products, and the subordination of the Chinese consumer, have been translated into examples of international success by the Chinese domestic media.

In this paper I speculate that the momentum of Chinese fashion is now at a tipping point. I note that at a policy level, the Chinese government's most recent, 12th Five Year Plan, implemented in 2011, clearly articulates a renewed focus on the domestic economy, moving China's economic momentum from an export-led income to domestic-led consumption. Furthermore, the plan stresses less reliance on foreign technology, and the greater importance of domestic innovation. Point eight, of the ten-point plan, specifically encourages cultural production in order to increase China's 'soft power'.^{vi} Importantly, in March 2013, China's First Lady, Peng Liyuan, accompanied her husband Xi Jinping, China's newly elected President, on their first state excursion when they visited Russia. Instead of wearing a luxury European fashion brand traditionally favoured by heads of state, Peng Liyuan specifically wore clothing attributed to the mid-priced Chinese fashion label called Exception. Her deliberate choice of a non-luxury Chinese fashion brand caused immediate and rampant speculation in the Chinese and international press about her reasons for doing so.^{vii}

For many in the Chinese cultural sector, Peng Liyuan's choice was seen as politically driven, in a new governmental era, where corruption among officials, most evident in the conspicuous consumption of foreign luxury fashion brands, has been reframed as a noxious practice in the new president's term of office. In fact, President Xi Jinping has made fighting corruption a top priority, urging the ruling Communist Party to 'oppose hedonism and flamboyant lifestyles'.^{viii} Peng Liyuan's message is also powerful, and alludes to an increasing acceptance by elite officials of Chinese consumer brands, yet this action might also be interpreted as an oblique directive by the wife of China's most powerful official, from deep within the political hierarchy. At the China Foreign Affairs University, Wang Fan, head of the Institute of International Relations held, 'In her role as first lady on this visit abroad, Peng Liyuan is exhibiting China's soft power'.^{ix} Furthermore, Zhang Yu, the editor of *Vogue China* said,

It's the first time that China's first lady appears [sic] like a modern woman...after so many years, we finally have a first lady who can represent us so appropriately. I think it is a landmark event.^x

Yet while such an incident is newsworthy, the attention given to Peng Liyuan serves best to illustrate the great expectations, and aspirations of the Chinese creative sector. It is from this creative setting in Shanghai that the agencies of the Hive, Dongliang, and The China Fashion Collective have appeared, serving to support under-resourced fashion designers. These agencies also curate Chinese fashion design for an increasingly interested foreign media, and for a domestic consumer who, with gathering momentum, is turning away from foreign brands, for well-made designer fashion from emerging and established designers.

In Beijing, the fashion critic, and prominent social commentator, Hung Huang has operated her retail store B.N.C (Brand New China) for several years, alongside her fashion magazine *iLook*, and she provides a similar service, choosing from the collections of Chinese designers, and selling them to a carefully cultivated client base. Hung Huang's curation is reliably informed because she was previously married to the famous Chinese film director, Chen Kaige, and was thus exposed to a cultural industry where political control, and the security of cultural form are paramount. Hung notes that China is an authoritarian state where 'the power base does not support anyone and everyone supports the power base'.^{xi} Furthermore, Hung Huang believes that if Peng Liyuan decides to support Chinese fashion, it is most likely she will create her own program through an official Chinese agency, an entity such as the China National Garment Association.

However I am mainly concerned with Shanghai, and independent designers. This paper highlights the appearance of a new business model that represents these kinds of designers. The agency model facilitates the dialogue between the designer, the consumer and the media. Over the course of my field research in China, these kinds of entities have emerged as fresh participants in the middle ground where they attempt to bridge the gap between fashion designers, create opportunities for brand promotion and inform consumers about Chinese designers. In Shanghai, the model is particularly evident around the streets of Xinle Lu and Changle Lu in the French Concession in Puxi where these curated retail locations provide rack space for designers to display their clothing collections. A notable aspect of these new entities

is that they represent only Chinese designers. In the Eurocentric fashion system, concept stores often hold a curated collection of global designer labels that represent a particular aesthetic, or other point of difference. In the following section, I will discuss three such entities beginning with an online model.

The China Fashion Collective^{xii} is notable as an online operation centred mainly on the designers who show at Shanghai Fashion Week. Its owner, Timothy Parent claims to represent more than twenty percent of China's top fashion designers, although some designers have cited a lack of other avenues as their reason for involvement. According to Parent, ^{xiii}the China Fashion Collective 'represents a curated group of Chinese fashion designers who have a unique sense for aesthetics in fashion partially derived from a unique culture, history and philosophy'. Parent asserts their work reinterprets and reflects upon this heritage in a 'non-literal and non-superficial way', and that their products have been previously unavailable to a global audience. Parent views his agency as a middleman, sited between numerous other fashion gatekeepers, including stores, buyers, the media and cultural institutions that might wish to interact with Chinese fashion designers. In addition, Parent offers an associated and ongoing blog-like commentary of Chinese fashion based upon his personal views. However the China Fashion Collective only operates as an online agency, and is of more use as a source of industry information.

In the French Concession, in Fumin Road, a different kind of activity takes place. The Hive is a concept store operated by Gary Yip, its Singaporean owner, who explains his aim is to provide a 'one-stop-shop' for affordable local labels: 'There are these great Shanghai-based designers, but they're scattered across town or only sell stuff online. What I wanted to do was bring them under one roof'. ^{xiv} At the Hive, an eclectic selection of clothing is on offer from five independent Chinese designer brands, including hipster menswear makers, 'threeSociety', and rock chic brand, 'WhatWhereWho. The Hive also represents accessory designers including JL, who draw upon traditional Chinese elements, and the stylish leather bag brand D.D.O as well as Xiaozhi by George.

Also in Fumin Road is Dong Liang Studio, which was founded by Wang Yaoyu and Nan Lang in 2009. With stores located in Beijing and Shanghai, their concept is to sell high quality, limited edition, exclusively Chinese fashion, whilst simultaneously promoting a small collective of handpicked local designers.

According to Mengsta,^{xv} ‘the store’s simple, stylish white walls, hardwood furniture and quirky installation art resemble Dover Street Market, a well-known London boutique’. The owners explain that most young designers in Shanghai find it difficult to promote themselves due to a lack of knowledge and resources. However as the market for fashion in Shanghai becomes more sophisticated, demand for high quality Chinese made fashion is increasing. Accordingly more designers are leaving their jobs in large companies to establish their own design studios and brands.

Dong Liang Studio acts as a platform for Chinese designers to promote their brand and expose their work to a larger audience. The agency takes control of marketing and promoting new brands leaving designers to focus solely on design. Yet one of the most challenging and early aspects for Dongliang was convincing designers to join the agency. The difference between these traditional stores and the China Fashion Collective is the immediate access they offer to designer clothing. For instance, at Dong Liang, trading hours commence at midday and continue until late, depending upon social events. During several conversations with the manager, it was explained that local celebrities sometimes arrive at the store on their way to an evening event, to choose a garment to wear. Stock levels are limited and designers, if given enough notice, will make up special garments if the client is important. And their products have drawn the attention of Chinese celebrities. For instance, Zhou Xun, a mainland actress and Valen Hsu, a pop singer from Taiwan, are among Dong Liang’s frequent customers.

This kind of local engagement is not restricted to press opportunities. Dong Liang also manages other kinds of activities that focus on collaborative ventures with established retailers and brands. In this way, Dong Liang exposes the Chinese brands they represent to new groups of consumers. For instance, a recent function with the Olive Shoppe, a retailer of international fashion brands allowed consumers to blend Chinese design with their purchases of global brands, providing a means to blend culture and lifestyle. A more commercial approach was demonstrated in an exhibition with the French brand Nina Ricci.

In this manner, Dong Liang and the Hive attempt to solve the tensions inherent in the path of local to global by providing support for Chinese designers in an international city that is overwhelmed for choice, and where the focus for Chinese fashion consumers has mostly been directed toward foreign, or imported brands. Like

many global cities, China's fashion environment is comprised of mass-market brands inside numerous malls, fast fashion brands, and luxury fashion brands that reflect the power and influence of the hegemonic Eurocentric fashion system. Buying behaviours show consumers tend to purchase general fashion at retailers like H&M or Zara, and may occasionally buy a handbag or shoes from an imported luxury brand as a reward. However, the owners of Dongliang believe that consumption preferences are slowly changing, and that Shanghai's designer boutiques and multi-brand boutiques will fill this niche.

Yet this is a challenging undertaking. Stores like the Hive and Dong Liang must tailor their offering to the demands of the public, which means clothing collections must turn over rapidly. Dong Liang's Beijing and Shanghai stores represent approximately 20 designers, which is a viable number, however designers are assessed regularly in accordance with their consistency or design development. They are also always on the lookout for new designers, tending to decide which designers they are interested in about six months before they include the designer in the offering. The owners of Dong Liang also keep a close eye on Chinese designers who are graduating from international design schools. For instance, May Jiang, a Shanghainese fashion designer who recently graduated from Central St Martins in London, spoke of her desire for this kind of representation,

I've seen them in Korea. Those agencies recommend fashion designers to top-notch international fashion weeks. All they charge is a cut on the profit the fashion week brings in to you.^{xvi}

Wang Yaoyu is also looking at the bigger picture. Dong Liang wants to collaborate with designer stores in Western countries to introduce Chinese brands to the world, and his aim is to provide a more complete Chinese representation on the global stage, and more influence over mainstream fashion trends.

In conclusion, my paper has shed some light on several new gatekeepers, who are navigating the margins of the clothing industry, Shanghai's fashion system with its focus on Shanghai Fashion Week, in order to challenge the hegemony of the Eurocentric fashion system. In their quest to shape the products of Chinese fashion designers, they support their clients by acting as mediators between diverse fashion systems, shaping the aesthetic of the designers and in turn legitimising them in ways

that Shanghai's fashion system may not be capable of. Some of these gatekeepers are powerful and respected, such as Hung Huang whose constructive criticism from Beijing reaches many ears, however the roles of The China Fashion Collective as a mediator between industry and media, and the representation of the Hive and Dong Liang are equally important for the development of Chinese fashion designers.

Notes

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